Mormon Pioneer Trail

National Historic Trail
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Bureau of Land Management
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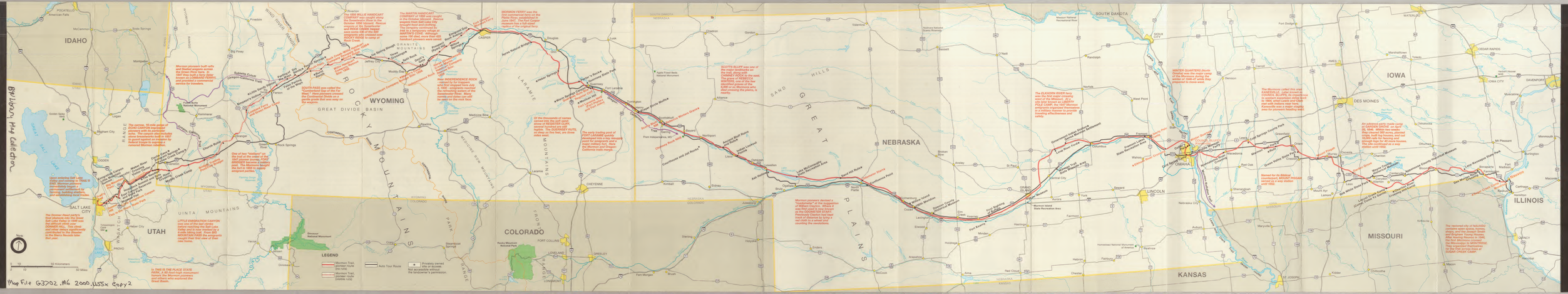

Mormon Pioneer Trail

National Historic Trail
Illinois to Utah

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Important dates in the 1846-47 journey from Nauvoo to Utah are noted across the top of this folder. The quotations are taken from contemporary diaries and letters and describe those years. All the objects shown here made the journey across the trail.

February 4, 1846
First wagons leave Nauvoo and cross the Mississippi River.

Mormon Blessing Gown

The Route West

To the sounds of snapping harness and creaking wagon wheels the pioneers in the vanguard of westward expansion moved out across the North American continent. Between 1840 and 1870, more than 500,000 emigrants went west along the Great Platte River Road from departure points along the Missouri River. This corridor had been used for thousands of years by American Indians and in the mid-19th century became the transportation route for successive waves of European trappers, missionaries, soldiers, teamsters, stage coach drivers, Pony Express riders, and overland emigrants bound for opportunity in the Oregon Territory, the Great Basin, and the California gold fields.

The trunk of the corridor generally followed the Platte and North Platte rivers for more than 600 miles, then paralleled the Sweetwater River before crossing the Continental Divide at South Pass. Beyond South Pass the route divided several times, each branch pioneered by emigrants seeking a better way to various destinations. The route's importance declined with the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869 but continued to receive limited use into the early 1900s.

Joseph Smith's (left) 1820 vision led to the organization of the Mormon Church. From 1839 to 1846 they lived and prospered in Nauvoo, Ill., (above).

Cover: Courtesy Brigham Young University Museum of Art

An Exodus

The Mormon Pioneer Trail
Few years in the Far West were more notable than 1846. That year saw a war start with Mexico, the Donner-Reed party embark on their infamous journey into a frozen world of indescribable horror, and the beginning of the best organized mass migration in American history. The participants of this migration, the Mormons, would establish thriving communities in what was considered by many to be a worthless desert.

From 1846 to 1869, more than 70,000 Mormons traveled along an integral part of the road west, the Mormon Pioneer Trail. The trail started in Nauvoo, Illinois, traveled across Iowa, connected with the Great Platte River Road at the Missouri River, and ended near the Great Salt Lake in Utah. Generally following pre-existing routes, the trail carried tens of thousands of Mormon emigrants to a new home and refuge in the Great Basin. From their labors arose the State of Deseret, later to become Utah Territory, and finally the State of Utah.

The Trail Experience
The Mormon pioneers shared similar experiences with others traveling west: the drudgery of walking hundreds of miles, suffocating dust, violent thunderstorms, mud, temperature extremes, bad water, poor for-

The great severity of the weather, and . . . the difficulty of crossing the river during many days of running ice, all combined to delay our departure, though for several days the bridge of ice across the Mississippi greatly facilitated the crossing. . .

Brigham Young, February 28, 1846

April 24, 1846
Garden Grove, the halfway point across Iowa, is reached. This was one of several semi-permanent camps set up for the use of later emigrants.

Pioneer Bugle

June 14, 1846
Brigham Young arrives at the banks of the Missouri River.

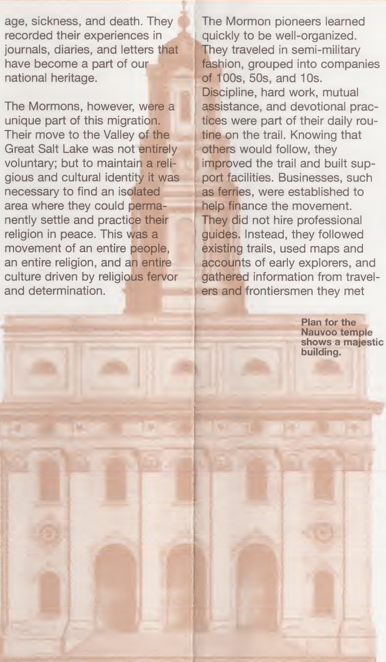
Travel Chest

September 1846
Winter Quarters is set up on the Nebraska shore of the Missouri. Approximately 4,000 people spent the winter here.

The Search for a Home

age, sickness, and death. They recorded their experiences in journals, diaries, and letters that have become a part of our national heritage.

The Mormons, however, were a unique part of this migration. Their move to the Valley of the Great Salt Lake was not entirely voluntary; but to maintain a religious and cultural identity it was necessary to find an isolated area where they could permanently settle and practice their religion in peace. This was a movement of an entire people, an entire religion, and an entire culture driven by religious fervor and determination.



Plan for the Nauvoo temple shows a majestic building.

The Mormon pioneers learned quickly to be well-organized. They traveled in semi-military fashion, grouped into companies of 100s, 50s, and 10s. Discipline, hard work, mutual assistance, and devotional practices were part of their daily routine on the trail. Knowing that others would follow, they improved the trail and built support facilities. Businesses, such as ferries, were established to help finance the movement. They did not hire professional guides. Instead, they followed existing trails, used maps and accounts of early explorers, and gathered information from travelers and frontiersmen they met along the way. An early odometer was designed and built to record their mileage while traveling on the trail. In the end, strong group unity and organization made the Mormon movement more orderly and efficient than other emigrants traveling to Oregon and California.

The Mormon Church

The Mormon pioneer experience is closely tied to the formation, growth, and development of their church, which was founded by Joseph Smith, April 6, 1830, in Fayette, New York. Within a few years it was known as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. According to the accounts of Mormon history, Joseph Smith translated a document from golden plates given to him by an angel. This document, The Book of Mormon, became the cornerstone of the new religion, and the name Mormon was applied to those who subscribed to these beliefs.

The church headquarters subsequently moved to Ohio, Missouri, and, in the spring of 1839, to Nauvoo, Illinois. It remained there until 1846, when the church moved beyond the Rocky Mountains into then unsettled Mexican territory in the Great Basin. There, Mormon leaders hoped to be insulated from further harassment, antagonism, and persecution.

Membership grew rapidly from 1830 to 1845, and the church prospered. Hostility, fear, and controversy, however, surrounded the church. The rapid growth of church membership, the financial success of the members and their church, religious beliefs that were outside mainstream Christian tradition, the practice of plural marriage (polygamy), a large well-armed militia, the blurring of lines between church and state, and the perception by some non-Mormons that the church was a threat all fueled intolerance. Hostilities escalated, and on June 27, 1844, Joseph Smith and his brother Hyrum were killed by an angry mob while jailed in Carthage, Illinois.

By 1845, the Mormon population in and around Nauvoo had grown to more than 11,000, making it one of the largest cities in the state. In September of that year, foes burned more than 200 Mormon homes and farm buildings outside Nauvoo in an attempt to force the Mormons to leave.

A move to the Far West had been discussed by church leaders as early as 1842, with Oregon, California, and Texas considered as potential destinations. In 1844, Joseph Smith obtained John C. Fremont's map and report, which described the Great Salt Lake and its surrounding fertile valleys. Subsequently, the Rocky Mountains and the Great Basin became the prime candidates for settlement.

Brigham Young

Courtesy Jeanette Taggart Holmes

Courtesy Daughters of Utah Pioneers

November 1846
Father Pierre de Smet, a Jesuit missionary, visits with the Mormons in Winter Quarters and provides information about the Great Basin area.

This piano crossed the plains on the Mormon Trail.

April 5, 1847
The first group, led by Brigham Young, leaves Winter Quarters.

> *I walked some this afternoon in company with Orson Pratte and suggested to him the idea of fixing a set of wooden cog wheels to the hub of a wagon wheel, in such order as to tell the exact number of miles we travel each day.*
>
> ***William Clayton, April 19, 1847***

Appleton Milo Harmon's Pioneer Journal

Courtesy LDS Church Archives

Heading West

Establishing the Trail: The Treks of 1846 and 1847

The initial movement of the Mormons from Nauvoo, Illinois, to the Valley of the Great Salt Lake occurred in two segments: one in 1846 and one in 1847. The first segment, across Iowa to the Missouri River, covered around 265 miles. The second segment, from the Missouri River to the Valley of the Great Salt Lake, covered about 1,032 miles.

The Trek of 1846

The departure from Nauvoo began on February 4, 1846, under the leadership of Brigham Young, who succeeded Joseph Smith as leader of the Mormon Church. After crossing the Mississippi River, the journey across Iowa followed primitive territorial roads and Indian trails. The initial party reached the Missouri River on June 14 of that year, having taken more than four months to complete the trip. Some of the emigrants established a settlement called Kanesville on the Iowa side of the river. Others moved across the river into the area of present-day (north) Omaha, Nebraska, building a camp called Winter Quarters.

The Mormons left Nauvoo earlier than planned because of the revocation of their city charter, growing rumors of U.S. government intervention, and fears that federal troops would march on the city. This early departure exposed them to the elements in the worst of winter. Heavy rains later turned the rolling plains of southern Iowa into a quagmire of axle-deep mud. Furthermore, few people carried adequate provisions for the trip. The weather, general unpreparedness, and lack of experience in moving such a large group of people, all contributed to the difficulties they endured.

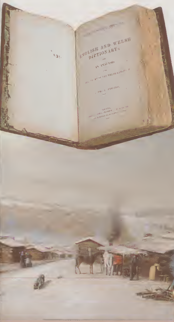
Along this first part of the trail, the Mormons developed skills for moving en masse. They established several semi-permanent camps, including Garden Grove and Mount Pisgah, where they planted crops and built facilities to assist those who followed. It was during this leg of the journey that Brigham Young first organized them into companies of 100s, 50s, and 10s. The lessons learned crossing Iowa were used by future companies of Mormons.

Crossing the Plains

The Trek of 1847

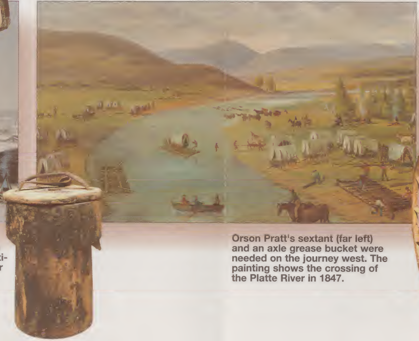
The longest leg of the journey began at Winter Quarters on April 5, 1847, and ended on July 24, 1847, when Brigham Young entered the Valley of the Great Salt Lake. The trip went smoother than the previous year's journey because the Mormons were better organized, had better provisions, and began the trek when trail conditions were optimal. The lead pioneer party left with 148 people (143 men, 3 women, and 2 young boys), 72 wagons, 93 horses, 66 oxen, 52 mules, 19 cows, 17 dogs, and some chickens. This hand-picked group was organized into two large divisions and further split into companies of 50 and 10. This organizational structure was based on Brigham Young's plan for migrating west. The plan also included details on camp behavior and devotional practices to be followed during the journey.

The trail across the Great Plains traversed hundreds of miles along the north side of the Platte and North Platte rivers. At Fort Laramie the Mormons crossed to the south side of the river, where they joined the Oregon Trail. About 100 miles later, they left the North Platte River at present day Casper, Wyoming. They then followed the Sweetwater River for almost 100 miles and crossed the Continental Divide at South Pass. At Fort Bridger, they left the Oregon Trail and struck out on their own following a route first recommended by California promoter Lansford Hastings and pio-



The Welsh-English dictionary (top) accompanied its owners across an ocean and three-quarters of a continent. The harshness of the weather in Winter Quarters comes through clearly in the painting above.

Courtesy Daughters of Utah Pioneers



Orson Pratt's sextant (far left) and an axle grease bucket were needed on the journey west. The painting shows the crossing of the Platte River in 1847.

Scandinavian pioneers pulled their handcarts 1,300 miles across the plains to the Valley of the Great Salt Lake.

May 26, 1847
Emigrants pass Chimney Rock.

Patty Sessions Diary

Courtesy LDS Church Archives

neered in 1846 by four companies of emigrants bound for California. These four companies blazed two different routes into the Salt Lake Valley. The Mormons followed the faint, year-old track of the ill-fated Donner-Reed party through the Wasatch Mountains.

The final 116 miles, from Fort Bridger to the Valley of the Great Salt Lake, were the most difficult. The people were weary, their wagons worn, and livestock weakened by almost 1,000 miles of walking. Travel through the narrow, willow-choked canyons and over tree-covered slopes and rocky ridges of the Wasatch Range was so slow that it took the pioneer party 14 days to complete this part of their journey. On July 22, 1847, when Thomas Bullock caught his first full view of the valley he shouted "hurra, hurra, hurra, there's my home at last."

The pioneer party began planting late crops as soon as they reached the valley. During the next few weeks, they laid out streets, built temporary shelters, and prepared for winter. Mormon emigrants continued to arrive during the remaining weeks of summer and fall, and approximately 1,650 people spent their first winter in the valley. Shortly after their arrival, Brigham Young and many members of the pioneer party made the return trip to Winter Quarters to be with their families and to help organize the next spring's migration to the valley.

The next 20 years would see about 70,000 Mormons traveling by wagons and handcarts to the Valley of the Great Salt Lake. Overland wagon travel declined after the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869, when emigrants could travel across the plains by rail.

This spinning wheel was a necessary tool for those who wanted to create a self-sufficient community beyond the Rocky Mountains.

In advance of us, at a great distance can be seen the outlines of mountains, loftier than any we have yet seen... their summits... covered with snow.
Horace Whitney, June 23, 1847

June 27, 1847
Mormons cross South Pass, the Continental Divide.

Cello

The Ones Who Walked

The Handcarts: 1856 to 1860

A unique feature of the Mormon migration was their use of handcarts. Handcarts, two-wheeled carts that were pulled by emigrants, instead of draft animals, were sometimes used as an alternate means of transportation from 1856 to 1860. They were seen as a faster, easier, and cheaper way to bring European converts to Salt Lake City. Almost 3,000 Mormons, with 653 carts and 50 supply wagons, traveling in 10 different companies, made the trip over the trail to Salt Lake City. While not the first to use handcarts, they were the only group to use them extensively.

The handcarts were modeled after carts used by street sweepers and were made almost entirely of wood. They were generally 6 to 7 feet long, wide enough to span a narrow wagon track, and could be alternately pushed or pulled. The small boxes affixed to the carts were 3 to 4 feet long and 8 inches high. They could carry about 500 pounds, most of this weight consisting of trail provisions and a few personal possessions.

All but two of the handcart companies completed the journey with few problems. The fourth and fifth companies, known as the Martin and Willie companies, left Winter Quarters in August 1856. This was very late to begin the trip across the plains. They encountered severe winter weather west of present-day Casper, Wyoming, and hundreds died from exposure and famine before rescue parties could reach them. While these incidents were a rarity, they illustrate that the departure date from the trailhead was crucial to a successful journey.

An emigrant train descends from the top of Big Mountain and enters the Valley of the Great Salt Lake.

Courtesy Utah Division of Parks and Recreation

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...and beholding in a moment such an extensive scenery open before us, we could not refrain from a shout of joy which almost involuntarily escaped from our lips the moment this grand and lovely scenery was within our view.
Orson Pratt, July 21, 1847

The Mormon Pioneer Trail

The Trail Today

Congress established the Mormon Pioneer National Historic Trail as part of the National Trails System on November 10, 1978. This historic trail commemorates the 1846-47 journey of the Mormon people from Nauvoo, Illinois, to the Valley of the Great Salt Lake. The designated corridor is almost 1,300 miles long and is managed as a cooperative effort among private landowners, trail associations, state and local agencies, the National Park Service, the Bureau of Land Management, and the U.S.

July 24, 1847
Brigham Young arrives in the Valley of the Great Salt Lake.

Forest Service. Land ownership along the trail is comprised of 822 miles (64 percent) on private land, 264 miles (20 percent) under federal management, and 214 miles (16 percent) in state and local ownership. Much of the trail is no longer visible, though some trail segments and sites can be visited. Long stretches of the trail can still be seen in Wyoming. The map on the reverse side of this folder shows both the historic route and site locations. If you want to visit sites on private land you must obtain the landowner's permission.

Exploring the Mormon Pioneer Trail

For further information on the history of the trail, locating sites, or traveling segments of the trail, you may contact:

Bureau of Land Management
Historic Trails Office
1701 East E St.
Casper, WY 82601

Historical Department
Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints
50 E. North Temple
Salt Lake City, UT 84150

Illinois Bureau of Tourism
P.O. Box 7905
Mount Prospect, IL 60056

Iowa Department of Economic Development
Iowa Division of Tourism
200 East Grand Avenue
Des Moines, IA 50309

Missouri Division of Tourism
P.O. Box 1055
Jefferson City, MO 65102

For information about specific states, you may contact:

National Park Service
Long Distance Trails Office
324 S. State St. Suite 250
P.O. Box 45155
Salt Lake City, UT 84145-0155

Nebraska Department of Economic Development
Travel and Tourism Division
P.O. Box 94666
Lincoln, NE 68509

Utah Division of Parks and Recreation
1636 West North Temple
Salt Lake City, UT 84116

Utah State Historical Society
300 Rio Grande
Salt Lake City, UT 84101

Wyoming Division of Tourism
I-25 at College Drive
Cheyenne, WY 82002

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This image courtesy Springville Museum of Art.